

**THIS ITEM IS FOR INFORMATION ONLY.** (Please note that 'Information Only' reports do not require Equality Impact Assessments, Legal or Finance comments as no decision is being taken.)

**Title of meeting:** Cabinet

**Subject:** Annual Adoption Agency Activity Report April 2021 - March 2022

**Date of meeting:** 22 November 2022

**Report by:** Sara Sweeney, Service Leader Through Care Team One and Adoption

**Wards affected:** All wards

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## **1. Requested by:**

1.1. It is required by Standard 25.6 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011 for Local Authority Adoption Services that the executive receives a six-monthly written report outlining the management and performance of the adoption agency which have been provided. This report provides the summary information for the whole period of April 2021 to March 2022.

## **2. Purpose**

2.1. This report will update the Cabinet on the activity of the Portsmouth Adoption Service for the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, as required by the Adoption regulations

2.2. The Portsmouth Adoption Service is provided directly by the Adoption Team within the Council. The team is responsible for the work with children who have a plan of adoption and works with the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) who find, assess, and support adopters.

2.3. This report will describe the work of the in-house adoption team and the RAA and provide data of the outcomes achieved in the last 12 months

2.4. It will provide an update on changes in the service due to a recent legal case known as the 'Somerset Judgement'

2.5. Lastly it will provide an outline of the priorities for the coming year.

### **3. Background**

3.1. In 2016 Authorised Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies joined together to form Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). As a result, Hampshire County Council (HCC), Isle of Wight Council (IOW), Portsmouth City Council (PCC) and Southampton City Council (SCC) Adoption Services came together, along with the voluntary adoption agencies Barnardo's and Parents and Children Together (PACT) to establish the Adopt South Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). Adopt South went live on 1 April 2019.

### **4. Portsmouth Adoption Team**

4.1 The Portsmouth Adoption Team take responsibility for children who have a plan for adoption until the point of the Adoption Order being made. The team undertakes the work that achieves that plan, prepares children for permanence, and concludes the legal requirements that changes a child's legal status to allow adoption to take place. The team comprises of three full time social workers, two part time social workers, a social work assistant and a team leader

4.2 The social workers in the Adoption Team begin working with children who are identified as needing a parallel plan of adoption.

4.3 A Parallel Plan ensures that a child who is unable to return to their birth parent(s) or wider family have an alternative permanence plan by means of adoption. This parallel plan avoids any delay in decision making but ensuring we are considering both options alongside each other.

4.4 The Adoption Social Team work to gather information about the child and their family. They are responsible for compiling all the relevant documentation which is used to complete a child's permanence report (CPR). This report forms part of the documentation provided to the Agency Decision Maker who is responsible for the consideration and potential agreement of an adoption plan. It must stand the test that nothing else, other than adoption, will reasonably do for a child.

4.5 The working relationship between the adoption social worker and child's social worker enables a smooth transition for the child, should they be made subject to a Care and Placement Order at a final court hearing. It is at this point that the adoption social worker becomes the allocated social worker. Family finding completed during the care proceedings enables a match to be made at the earliest opportunity. A linking meeting is held when a potential family has been identified for the child. The adoption social worker will then meet with the prospective adopters, and the adopter's social worker from Adopt South, and will begin the process of progressing to a linking Panel. Following a successful Linking Panel recommendation, the team begins the work of moving the child to live with their forever family. There is careful and considered work undertaken as to when and how introductions are made. The team work to support the child, their prospective adoptive family, and their birth family to the point of an Adoption Order being made. Life story work and memory boxes are prepared by the team during this period to support them in moving to their forever family and to support their identify in moving forwards.

4.6 Feedback is regularly sought from prospective adopters and adopters during the assessment and matching stages. This assists in understanding how we are doing and to shape service developments. For example, in 2021 adopters were asked the

following question: " Could you describe any areas of Portsmouth Children's Social Care that you think we do well?" Some responses included:

"We just want to take this opportunity to praise SW [Portsmouth City Council] and SW [Adopt South] for the amazing support they have given us. They have been totally professional. Their friendly and positive attitudes and practical advice have helped us through the process of becoming adoptive parents"

"Communication was good and told who to contact if someone was on leave. Explanations as to what's happening were very good."

"Life story books are good. Our most recent Social Worker for the children has been excellent"

## 5. Adopt South

- 5.1 The key functions for Adopt South are the recruitment, assessment and support of prospective adoptive families, and the post adoption support services for adopted children and their families. The Adopt South Children's Family Finding Team is directly linked to each local authority Children's Adoption Team to ensure suitable potential adoptive families are identified as soon as possible, promoting timely matching and placement for those children. Those children adopted, and their families now have access to Adopt South's comprehensive post adoption service.
- 5.2 Adopt South compares well to the other 31 Regional Adoption Agencies. They have the lowest number of children waiting for adoption, have approved the second highest number of adopters, and have successfully worked within finite resources having spent less money on interagency placements. The timeliness of the work is positive enabling children to secure permanent families more quickly and all except one being placed with in house adopters.
- 5.3 The close working relationship between Adopt South Post Adoption Service and the Children's Adoption Team allows for the early identification of additional support if required. It also allows for children to be placed locally to their area of birth if safe to do so.
- 5.4 Since the launch of Adopt South, **319** children have been formally linked with adoptive families. Of these, **167** have been HCC children; **24 IOW** children; **50** PCC children; **78** SCC children.
- 5.5 Across the Adopt South region only 4 children (out of 93) being placed externally during Year 3 and just 3 (out of 118) and 4 (out of 108) in Year's 1 and 2, noticeable advantages have continued to be seen. These include families being able to access local adoption support, and there has been a positive impact on staff time with staff travel significantly reduced.

## 6. Adoption Activity

- 6.1. The adoption activity for the period of 2019- 2022 is detailed in appendix 1. The most recent data tells us:

- There were 18 children adopted in the year 2021/2022.
- Within the year there were 10 children linked with prospective adopters.
- 23 children had plans of adoption agreed in the 12 months period between April 2021 and March 2022
- 6 placements were made under fostering for adoption

6.2. For some young children unable to live with their birth family it is possible for them to be placed in Fostering for Adoption Placements (FfA). These are adoptive families who are also approved temporarily as foster carers for a specific child. Fostering for Adoption can offer the best opportunity for the child if the court decides they need to be adopted as the child can be placed with an approved adoptive family whilst parents and wider family members are being considered. The child remains in one placement whilst decisions are being made rather than being placed with a foster family and then moved to an adoptive family should the court decide the child needs adoption. The Annual figures are that 7 placements were agreed, and six placements were made under Fostering for Adoption. This contrasts to a total of four in the previous year.

6.3. In the year April 2021 to March 2022 there were 23 plans for adoption agreed. This includes the increase in Fostering to Adoption placements whose increase can be attributed to the Somerset Judgment i.e. not delaying permanence for a child whilst the judgement was waited for.

6.4. Portsmouth's timeliness for children being adopted has continued to improve. The government threshold measurement from the date the child entered care to the date the child is placed with an adoptive family is 426 days. For this reporting period Portsmouth's timescale has reduced to 205 days which is a significant reduction from the previous reporting year being 356 days.

6.5. Portsmouth has continued to progress potential matches for children in a timely way. The threshold is 121 days, and for this reporting period, the average number of days for children having their adoption plan agreed by the court and the local authority agreeing to the potential match with an adoptive family was 120 days.

6.6. During this period all children, except for one, have been placed with Adopt South adoptive families which means those children remain placed within the geographical region and those families will already have knowledge of and access to the Adopt South support service. Therefore, adoptive parents are more likely to access early support to avoid any risk of adoption breakdown. The one child out of area has a diagnosis of Foetal alcohol Syndrome and his placement through PACT has been very successful

## **7. Adopters' Journey**

- Adopt South nationally approved the second highest number of adopters in this reporting year being 118 new households
- We were the only RAA who ensured applicants making an initial information request became registered as prospective adopters within the 5 day timescale
- We were the only RAA who achieved Placement Order to matching with prospective adopters within 2 months. This has enabled children to have their permanence secured within a timely manner.

- We were 1 of 5 RAA's who achieved the 4 month timescale of placing children with prospective adopters to the making of a final Adoption Order thereby securing final permanence and certainty for children.

## 8. Adoption Support

8.1 Many children placed for adoption come from families with complex backgrounds where they have experienced trauma due to ongoing neglect, families experiencing domestic abuse and drug and alcohol abuse. The adoption support provided includes interventions such as family therapy, play therapy and birth parent counselling. Research tells us of the significant impact on a child's development of early childhood trauma and it is imperative that families can access support in a timely manner. This provides support as they progress through their minority and onto adulthood. It can ensure an increased resilience for the child to enable them to adjust and repair from their early experiences. Feedback from the adoption panel for one family having received such support stated

*" When providing a summary xxx was very child centred, presented with warmth and a robust understanding of the children's needs, highlighting the prospective adopters therapeutic responses to the children and growth in the children's confidence and sense of safety."*

8.2 Information received from Adopt South for this reporting period include the following:

- Number of enquiries to the Advice and Support Line: **1580**
- Number of new adoption support needs assessment completed: **123**
- Total Adoption Support funds received to date: **£243,835.84**
- Number of adult work enquiries which involves accessing records, providing financial and emotional support to adoptive families and mentoring: **326**
- Number of adult work cases allocated: **88**
- Number of adult work open cases: **average 112 each month**
- Total number of workshops and groups: **20**
- Total number of attendees at Groundworks preparation for adoption workshops: **136**
- Total Educational Psychologist consultations: **19**

## 9. Somerset- Judgment

9.1. In November 2021, Somerset County Council asked for legal advice about the Placement Orders for ten children (who had not yet been matched with adopters), where Adoption Agency Regulations had not been fully complied with. This was particularly in relation to the way children's health information was presented to the Court. There was subsequently a delay for children who were awaiting final orders of adoption, whilst clarity was sought by Local Authorities in relation to the expectations of the Courts regarding Medical Advisors reports for Adoption. The President of the Family Division handed down the final judgement of the Somerset case in April 2022.

9.2. Portsmouth City Council, alongside the RAA, have planned to ensure compliance with the medical advice in line with this judgement. This requires an assurance of a comprehensive medical summary being included by the Medical Advisor in the

paperwork presented to the Agency decision Maker. During the period of legal proceedings to resolve the legal issues, Adoption Orders and Placement Orders could not be granted. However, they could be placed with prospective adopters under a Foster to Adopt arrangement. This prevented delay for children in forming relationships with their adopters, which is a critical element of promoting early attachment.

## **10. National picture**

10.1. Nationally there continues to be a decline in the number of children being adopted. The latest figures from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (the ASGLB), showed this decline has continued through the first half of 2021-22, with falling numbers of children at every stage of the adoption process. They showed that, in the second quarter of 2021-22 (July to September) there was a decline in every stage in the adoption process from decision to adoption order.

## **11. For local consideration**

11.1. The number of children needing adoption has reduced and Portsmouth has seen a reduction in the number of children with a court agreed adoption plan (Placement Order), over the past three years reducing from 25 to 18. Portsmouth Children's Social Care continues to maintain a robust parallel planning process which is tracked and monitored through the care proceedings tracker and Looked After Child reviews. This is telling us that work is completed in a timely manner and that all children needing to be considered for adoption have a parallel plan. This may be placement with birth parents, special guardians, relatives, long-term fostering, or adoption.

## **12. Areas of development**

12.1. As part of the National Adoption Strategy (July 2021) the government provided £650,000 investment to regional adoption agencies to boost adoptive family recruitment, particularly for those children with complex needs and deemed harder to place i.e., older children, sibling groups and children of Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds. Adopt South continuously updates the recruitment strategy including developing prospective adoptive parents' knowledge, understanding and support to promote matching with the children with complex needs. This work is enabling the identification of prospective adopters and subsequent matching and there are no children in the city waiting for matching currently.

12.2. In summary the strengths of Adopt South for Portsmouth:

- The recruitment pool is shared across all the four regions and there are less out of area adoptions having to be considered and purchased.
- There is immediate access to a wider pool of adoptive families for Portsmouth children across the region.
- Adoptive placements are more localised within the regional area, promoting efficiency in adoption support, particularly specialist local service providers for adoption support.
- We are building on local authority good practice, knowledge and expertise to enable prospective adopters to be fully prepared and suitably matched and supported with those children placed - securing that child's future throughout their childhood and beyond.
- Regionalising adoption support enables adoptive families being able to access robust comprehensive support packages to mitigate risk of disruption for children with complex needs.

### **13. Conclusion and plans for 2022/23**

13.1 The Local authority and the RAA have continued to ensure that children who need an adoptive family have been prioritised. There have been some challenging areas, and the key performance data shows a reduction in the number of children being adopted. Whilst this is a national picture, there have been some challenges in finding placements for children who have additional needs. This is being supported with the additional funds provided with the national adoption strategy.

13.2 The continued funding will support adoptive families to provide the care for children who have experienced trauma in their early childhood so that they can settle and benefit from adoption.

13.3 Additional funding will support the need for more adoptive families for children that are harder to place

13.4 The priorities for the next year are as follows.


- Any potential delays within the court process need to be mitigated to ensure children are placed in a timely manner with their adoptive families. As a result of the pandemic, applications to the court are now heard on a "bulk" listed day rather than individually. We will ensure compliance with timely applications for the bulk listings, including compliance with the Somerset judgment.
- We will continue to identify children through the permanence process so that where the parallel plan is adoption, they can be placed with a family at the earliest point should this be the outcome of the court, alongside all necessary support that may be required. This includes reducing the time between placement order and matching
- We will review and develop the current process in gathering feedback from adopters and birth families to have increased confidence that we are listening to people that use our services and ensure this shapes our planning as we move forward

Signed by (Director)

#### **Appendices:**

#### **Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972**

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location
Adoption Activity 2013 - 2022	End of document
Adoption Scorecard	End of document
RAA Year 3 - 2021-22 - Portsmouth City Council Report	 Year 3 - 2021-22 - Portsmouth City Cou



**Appendix 1** Adoption activity 2013 – 2022

<b>Year 1 April - 31 March</b>	<b>Adoption orders No. of children adopted</b>	<b>Children's plans for adoption agreed</b>	<b>Placement Orders granted</b>	<b>Children linked with adoptive family</b>	<b>Prospective adoptive families approved</b>	<b>FfA placements</b>	<b>Placements disrupted</b>
2019/20	25	27	20	21	34 (Portsmouth number)	2	2
2020/21	18	16	16	19	117 (Adopt South)	5	0
2021/22	18	23	19	10	141(Adopt South)	7	0

## Appendix 2 - Adoption Scorecards

- 1) Page 9 shows data extracted from the DfE Adoption; Special Guardianship Leadership Board Adoption Scorecards published 24/08/20. For full information please see link:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards)

- 2) Government thresholds for children needing adoption timeliness

A1: 426 days - from date child enters care to moving in with adoptive family

A2: 121 days -from date the court agrees to local authority placing a child for adoption to the date the local authority agrees the match for the child with an adoptive family

Government Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB), figures for rolling year 2016-19 (published August 2020)

A1: National England average 433 days

A2: National England average 173 days

Portsmouth timescales for 2020 / 21

Scorecard 10 - 356 days

Scorecard 2 - 200 days

Scorecard 20 - 205 days

### Timescales for April 2021 - March 2022

#### Scorecard figures for 2021 - 22

	Quarter 1 (April - June)	Quarter 2 (July - September)
<b>Scorecard 10</b> A10 (average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with adoptive family, adjusted for foster career adoptions, for children who have been adopted.)	<b>198</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>Scorecard 2</b> A2 (Average time (in days) between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.)	<b>112</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>Scorecard 20</b> A20 (Average time (in days) between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.) - 204	<b>126</b>	<b>71</b>

	<b>Quarter 3 (October - December)</b>	<b>Quarter 4 (January - March)</b>
<b>Scorecard 10</b> A10 (average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with adoptive family, adjusted for foster career adoptions, for children who have been adopted.)	<b>374</b>	<b>804</b>
<b>Scorecard 2</b> A2 (Average time (in days) between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.)	<b>273</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>Scorecard 20</b> A20 (Average time (in days) between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.) - 204	<b>177</b>	<b>620</b>